

## FEATURE





# DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM IN INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM What Our Students Need to Know

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My interest in intellectual freedom was one of the predispositions that drew me to a career in school librarianship. I began working as a librarian at a large public school eleven years ago. Today I lead a team of three school librarians serving about 450 students in grades 6 through 12 at a 100-year-old secular independent school for girls in Silicon Valley, south of San Francisco. Like all independent schools, we operate separately from the public school system and are funded primarily by tuition. Beyond this commonality, the profiles of independent schools across the country vary tremendously, from schools with multiple sprawling campuses to tiny urban schools, serving students from pre-K–12, including both religiously affiliated and secular institutions. About 10 percent of America's students attend independent schools (Council for American Private Education 2015).

Independent school librarians have the privilege and the challenge of crafting curricula and establishing priorities for our programs. How have we leveraged these opportunities to inform students about their rights and responsibilities with regard to intellectual freedom?

## Respecting Divergent Viewpoints

I sought out the perspective of a particular ninth-grade student on the topic of intellectual freedom. She attended our school as a sixth-grader and then spent two years in India before she returned to begin high school. I asked her to compare her experience at an international school serving the children of diplomats and executives to our northern California independent school. In her opinion, intellectual freedom thrives in our school, but she remarked that she misses the diversity of opinions among her international peers. Hearing them articulate a broad range of positions helped her reflect on her own beliefs. So, while she praises our community, she also indicates a challenge posed by the relative uniformity of our population.

Contrary to my previous experience in urban public schools, the nonconforming viewpoint in my independent school is often a conservative or religious one. Creating space for these positions to be heard respectfully can be a challenge when the dominant culture of the institution is liberal and secular, but intellectual freedom is undermined if the school-wide discourse becomes hegemonic. Colleagues at other independent schools cite concerns that arise around student journalism as ground zero for such struggles. School librarians can contribute to an atmosphere

that supports intellectual freedom by drawing attention to the subtle messages about community values—messages that are communicated by virtue of what is included or excluded from our curricular and co-curricular offerings.

## Internet Filtering and Access to Information

The Internet filter in the public schools where I began my career was a constant irritant. The algorithm was a blunt instrument that blocked sites based on a list of keywords and impeded access to valuable teaching tools such as YouTube. Students used proxy servers to dodge the Web filter daily. With imprecise filters that were easily outwitted, I felt complicit in creating a moral hazard, tempting students to break an ill-conceived rule, and I feared being held responsible for students' illicit behavior on library computers.

If we want students to act honorably and responsibly, we must give them opportunities to earn our trust. Filters indicate an assumption that they are not worthy of trust. Many independent schools, including my own, offer unfiltered Internet access to all students. This unfiltered access sends the powerful

message that our institution values free access to information and trusts educators to help students make good choices. This increased freedom is scaffolded by an acceptable-use policy that uses clear language to outline expectations. Further, many independent schools have honor codes that are central to a school's identity. Building on these ethical foundations, we teach students the practical skills and discernment necessary to navigate the ever-growing world of information.

## Censorship and the Freedom to Read

Promoting the freedom to read widely has long been a core aspect of library programs. Banned Books Week creates an opportunity to focus on this theme. Like many libraries, we set up informative, eye-catching displays that arouse curiosity in our young patrons.

We also host a special program for our eighth-grade students. Collaboration with English teachers aligns this program with study of *The Book Thief*, a story in which control of information plays a critical role. Marcus Zusak's excellent book sensitizes students to the

potential of the written word to effect societal and personal change. Our students learn about common reasons for contemporary book challenges and the advocacy role of dedicated librarians. We examine ALA's Freedom to Read statement, affirming that each student, together with her family, has the right to decide what is appropriate for herself (2004).

We also explain how our collection is developed, highlighting the difference between censorship and selection. Some years we've been fortunate to host Skype visits with authors who have experienced censorship. This program has been incredibly effective at making the impact of book challenges tangible for students.

## Intellectual Property and Fair Use

Today's students are not only consumers of information; technology has increased opportunities to create and publish independently. Appropriating and remixing aspects of existing creative works is a significant component of contemporary art and publishing. While students have a sense that much of their use of copyrighted materials is extralegal, they tend to have an oversimplified understanding of the law and their rights. How can we empower students to fully exercise their intellectual freedom as content creators, while instilling a respect for intellectual property?

Our school library provides an annual workshop on intellectual property and fair use. This program is linked to tenth-grade history, a course in which students study American government and debate controversial issues. We provide background on the history and purpose of copyright law, and

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examine case studies. Students frame arguments both for and against fair use in each case before hearing the verdict found by the courts.

A colleague at another independent school described the “culture of attribution” her library has been instrumental in building. Taking responsibility for use of copyrighted materials also means taking ownership of the contribution made to the scholarly dialogue or aesthetic culture by remixing, juxtaposing, and reflecting on the works of others. Our students are introduced to the Creative Commons licensing structure as an alternative to the “all rights reserved” approach. We can help students see attribution as not just a chore but as an opportunity to participate in creation and sharing of knowledge.

### **Privacy Rights and Responsibilities**

In our networked age, students face complex questions of privacy. We recognize the benefits provided by technologies like smartphones and GPS, but we know they produce huge quantities of data about our private lives. Intellectual freedom is curtailed when we are subject to surveillance. Even strictly legal and non-embarrassing information can be misconstrued; even our trusted retailers and institutions can be hacked.

As an introduction to these thorny issues, we teach a lesson to mark ALA’s Choose Privacy Week. Our eighth-grade students, who study American history and travel to visit the nation’s capital, are primed to consider privacy rights within some historical context. We examine the Fourth Amendment, which guarantees freedom from unreasonable

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search and seizure. We clarify that, because these restrictions apply only to government agents, students in public schools have more legal privacy protection than students in independent schools (Massachusetts n.d.). We also consider the limitations of the amendment; sharing information with a third party may forfeit the “reasonable expectation of privacy.” Students compromise their privacy rights when they share personal information with service providers, including social-media platforms and search engines.

Students Google their own names, examine the results, and are counseled on how to manage their digital footprints. We suggest they keep their personal accounts and usernames separate from their more formal, school-related online identity. We remind them that college admissions officers and potential employers will one day evaluate them in light of their digital profiles. We coach students on reviewing privacy settings for services they use and urge them to consider the benefits of cloaked browsing and anti-tracking browser extensions such as Privacy Badger (Electronic Frontier Foundation n.d.). This year students created short video public service announcements based on “factsheets” we provided on topics such as strong passwords and protecting users’ privacy while engaging with social media.

## A Question of Values

Intellectual freedom is not a value we hold in a vacuum but, instead, in a particular time and place. Throughout history and across the world today, unfettered access to information is the exception, not the norm. It is our responsibility to exercise and defend this freedom in our own society, while striving to understand the historical and political contexts that frame this issue differently in many cultures around the world.

Reflecting on our instructional program through the lens of intellectual freedom has reinforced a few key tenets. First, library instruction is always most relevant to students when it is linked to classroom curricula. Second, when we’re training students in matters involving ethics and personal choice, it is key to avoid being overly didactic; instead, we help students understand their options and provide them with tools. Finally, we cannot do our best work in isolation. It is essential to enlist the support of colleagues if we are to build a culture of intellectual freedom in our schools.



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